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# The Book Arts and Preservation: An Interview with George M. Cunha

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## The Book Arts and Preservation: An Interview with George M. Cunha

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*Karen T. Ellenberg*

MRS. ELLENBERG: Mr. Cunha, can you tell me the origin of your interest in binding?

MR. CUNHA: I began collecting books on the sea when I was a youngster. Then, in my many years in the Navy, and in traveling around the world, I was able to acquire things that I wouldn't have been able to do otherwise. Because of my background in chemistry, I began to be curious about why some books that I owned that were two or three hundred years old were still in excellent condition, and some that were forty or fifty years old were in deplorable condition. And I just began to look into the problem, and I became aware of the fact that paper is a vulnerable substance.

Many of the books that I acquired, because of their age, needed attention and—working on a young naval officer's salary—I didn't have much money to pay for it. So I taught myself.

Then, early in my naval career, I lived with my family in England. In the small village we lived in, on the south coast of England, there was a retired gentleman who'd been a bookbinder at the British Museum. He began to show me some of the techniques that they used there and encouraged me to use them.

When I came back to the United States, I was close to Brown University Libraries. They had a very fine bookbinding workshop with an elderly gentleman who'd been binding for fifty years.

MRS. ELLENBERG: What was his name?

MR. CUNHA: Daniel Knowlton—he's still there.

MRS. ELLENBERG: What years were you in England?

MR. CUNHA: It was from 1949 to 1951. That was a very happy tour of duty.

MRS. ELLENBERG: So, your interest in paper conservation grew out of your love for books?

MR. CUNHA: Yes, that's how I began to look into it. Some information had been published on the subject in the 1940s and 1950s. In the beginning I wasn't crusading for paper



preservation—as I do now! It was just a personal interest in how to make my library stand up better.

MRS. ELLENBERG: I know that your work in conservation and preservation has become a second career. Tell me about your decision to do that.

MR. CUNHA: Well, that's quite simple. My wife was a wonderful person. She was my best friend, my colleague, and my severest critic—and a very remarkable woman. When we made up our minds to leave the navy, she said to me one day, "Look, buster, you'd better get another job, or we're going to be divorced in six months." And it was she who said, "Why don't you offer your services to some libraries and see if there's a requirement for bookbinders?" So, I wrote to the Huntington Library in California and the Newberry Library in Chicago, the libraries at Harvard, and to the Boston Athenaeum. And, much to my surprise, I got invitations from each one of them to come and talk.

MRS. ELLENBERG: That's wonderful.

MR. CUNHA: They didn't offer me a job, but they said they'd be interested in talking further about it. We were living in Washington during my last couple of years in the Navy, and I was sent by the Navy Department up to Boston. While I was there, I went over to the Boston Athenaeum on Beacon Street and walked into this handsome building that was built in 1844. It was fabulous! I wasn't in it two minutes when I said, "This is where I want to be." And I went up and met the director, Dr. Walter Muir Whitehill, a very distinguished historian. We talked. He was also a retired naval officer. He'd spent World War II as an aide to Admiral King, the Chief of Naval Operations. So, we had something in common. He said, "We've got a particular job here that needs to be done. We've got George Washington's library, and we want to make sure that it's in first class condition."

MRS. ELLENBERG: George Washington's books—in Boston instead of at Mount Vernon? What kinds of things did you have to do to get the collection into a proper state of preservation?

MR. CUNHA: We went to the Trustees' Room—just lined with bookshelves—in which all of the great treasures of the Athenaeum were kept, including the eleven hundred and ninety-some books that had been General Washington's. I took a few volumes down, and I realized that this was going to be a relatively simple job, because all of those books were printed in the eighteenth century, in the time of *good* paper and *good* leather for binding. They'd



held up very well, although some of them had been accidentally damaged here and there. I said, "Mr. Whitehill, there's no problem—we've got it under control." And, then, about three months later, I went to work at the Athenaeum. They'd set up a shop for me down in the basement.

MRS. ELLENBERG: Did you do all of the work on the Washington library, or did some of it have to be sent away?

MR. CUNHA: They wouldn't let those things out of the building! That's an interesting story, because of how the books got to Boston. You'd think they would be at Mount Vernon, where all of Washington's other things are. Well, what happened was that Bushrod Washington, who was General Washington's nephew and heir, was rather an improvident person. He didn't manage Mount Vernon well, and he was always in need of money. He realized, at one point, that this library had a commercial value because of the association with Washington. He put them in boxes and sent them by schooner up the coast to Boston where they were off-loaded onto a dock in Boston harbor for shipment to England—to be sold at Sotheby's auction house! Somehow, the trustees of the Boston Athenaeum realized that these books were standing on the dock, and they offered Bushrod Washington five thousand dollars for the bunch of them—and he accepted.

Whitehill and I were having lunch together one day, and I said, "Walter, now that we've got the General's library back in good condition, why don't we send it down to Mount Vernon where it belongs? We can take the books they have, duplicating Washington's, and put them on our shelves." I nearly got fired! His whiskers twitched, his face got red, and he said, "Cunha! Never say anything like that to a librarian again!" That's the first time that I realized that librarians were essentially a bunch of pack rats!

MRS. ELLENBERG: That's exactly right! Were there any features about the bindings or the bookplates that were unusual?

MR. CUNHA: No, he didn't use a bookplate. But General Washington signed in the upper right hand corner of the title-page, "G. Washington." That's the only mark of ownership. He made very few marginal notes in his books, but they were well-used. He had acquired those books over his whole lifetime, and he was a bookish person. You could see that he used them, because they showed the evidence for books of that period—all of the pages were "opened." People have collected many libraries merely for the



sake of collecting, but you can see that Washington *used* his books.

MRS. ELLENBERG: Well, Mr. Cunha, what happened after your project with the Washington library?

MR. CUNHA: Whitehill said, "Go around the library and see what else needs attention." I said, "There *must* be something else. . . ." That was the understatement of the year! The problem was that the climate in the Boston Athenaeum was absolutely deplorable.

The building itself was constructed in the 1840s. The Athenaeum was established in the 1810s. The nucleus of its collections, though, was the Boston Library, founded in 1767. The first acquisition was of a Boston private library—twelve or fifteen hundred books. Since the beginning, members have owned "shares" in the Athenaeum. And memberships seldom become available—it's quite a patrician thing. But these proprietors have bequeathed sums to the organization, so it's somewhat comfortably endowed.

MRS. ELLENBERG: How long did you stay at the Athenaeum?

MR. CUNHA: About ten years to the day.

MRS. ELLENBERG: Could you describe some of your activities?

MR. CUNHA: Well, Whitehill and I were of a similar age, we had a common interest in the Navy, and we just enjoyed each other's company. We frequently went to lunch together. One day, Dr. Whitehill inquired, "How are things down in the shop?"—his expression for my bindery.

"Walter," I said, "I don't know what to tell you. We're not doing well at all. The books in the Athenaeum are falling apart more rapidly than we can put them together."

In typical officer's fashion, Whitehill retorted, "Well, we have a problem that needs solving and you've got a job to do—get on with it!"

I said, "Okay—then I'm going to take a lot of travel. I'm going to find out what's going on in this field in other parts of the country and other parts of the world."

"Don't bother me with the details!" was all he said.

The British Library and the British Museum were a single entity in those times. I understood that they had a pretty sensible program over there, and I wanted to see what they were doing. Whitehill wrote me a letter of introduction to Sir Frank Francis, the director of the British Museum. So Dorothy and I took off.



The people at the British Museum took us down to meet the chief of the research laboratory and the head of the bindery. We stayed there for three weeks. We went right down into the shops, talking to the people and asking questions. Then Anthony Warner, who was the chief scientist, commented that they were doing some pretty important work over in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. He wrote us a nice letter of introduction to Françoise Flieder—she was the chief conservator and a wonderful person. While we were visiting with Françoise Flieder, she suggested that we go to the National Archives in Spain, where they were setting up a conservation program. From there we went to Italy, to the Institute of Book Pathology in Rome—rather an odd name for a very important laboratory that's been a pioneer in book preservation for fifty years. Then, into Germany and on to Salzburg. At lunch in Salzburg our host told us about work going on with museum objects at Oberlin College in Ohio, and he suggested that would be worth examining, too. So, we went to Oberlin, which was mostly concerned with paintings, prints, and broadsides, but on a consortium basis.

MRS. ELLENBERG: Were their museum procedures of any value for libraries?

MR. CUNHA: Well, interestingly, they were approaching museum collections in their entirety, rather than just item by item. They were talking about climate control and light and storage and security. Also, their interest was regional—serving a number of participating institutions. I realized that they really had the answer. So we wrote up a proposal for the trustees to set up a cooperative conservation effort that would incorporate all of the libraries in the Boston area—the Widener at Harvard, Boston Public, and so forth. We wanted one highly skilled staff supported by shared costs. Well, Whitehill really liked it.

I went to work at the Boston Athenaeum in 1963, and that was 1965. From the time of Mr. Whitehill's approval, it took seven years to get our cooperative conservation program off the ground. We opened the first of April in 1973.

MRS. ELLENBERG: Seven years? What kind of problems did you have?

MR. CUNHA: Whitehill was a very popular speaker, and we both made a hard sell for the idea of a cooperative conservation effort. For some reason, we seemed to be getting nowhere. Most librarians were just not interested, but one day, down in the



bindery at the Athenaeum, a fellow walked in and introduced himself as Rockwell Potter. He was the head of the archives branch of the Connecticut State Library. The six New England states, using identical legislation, had set up a program to work on problems of mutual benefit. "The New England Library Board," he said, "has heard about your cooperative conservation idea, and we'd like to pursue it." That was 1971.

I kept Whitehill informed of what was going on, until one day I said, "They've asked me to run it for them."

Walter said, "I think it's a great idea!"

So, with his blessing I left, and that's how the New England Document Conservation Center came into existence. It now has a facility of its own and sixty-five people on the payroll.

MRS. ELLENBERG: When you were back at the Athenaeum, did you develop relationships with any binders?

MR. CUNHA: At the Lakeside Press in Chicago Dorothy and I met a fellow named Harold Tribolay. When he realized what we were interested in, he just said, "Come on down and stay with us." Then we met Peggy Lecky out at UCLA. Anyplace at all where there would be people doing the type of work we were doing, we'd say, "Let's go and get acquainted with them."

There are some people in the conservation business who are very idealistic. They are superb craftsmen, and they do beautiful bookbinding. But preserving these—to me—isn't the greatest problem. Acquiring fine bookbindings is a hobby that only very wealthy individuals can participate in. The problem that interests me is finding mass treatments for collections in their entirety—not just for individual books.

MRS. ELLENBERG: Were there many women you met who were bookbinders?

MR. CUNHA: In the 1930s, just before World War II disrupted everything, there was a certain trend for women binders. Talented women whose families were growing up and who were looking for a second career realized that bookbinding was an opportunity worth pursuing. Some went to France to study. Hope Weil was one and Caroline Horton another. There were quite a few of these women who studied in the established European binderies and then offered their services to American colleges and universities. Laura Young, for example, worked at Columbia. Arno Werner's wife was one of these women—the Werners were a delightful couple. Polly Lada-Mocarski is still living in New Haven. She grew up in



relatively comfortable circumstances and, as many young women did back in the 1920s and 30s, she went abroad to study book binding. It was "the thing to do." These women came back and led the way among fine and restoration binders. I think that the success of the Guild of Book Workers in America is due to the dedication of these women binders. There were, of course, competent men binders in the organization, too, and I was vice-president many years ago. Later when Laura Young had her private studio near Columbia, Dorothy studied finishing with her for about six months. Laura was just passing along to her the techniques she had learned in Europe forty years prior to that. MRS. ELLENBERG: Returning to the basic conservation issues with paper, which have been your great concern, I wonder if you ever dealt with W. J. Barrow?

MR. CUNHA: Bill Barrow? I knew him very well indeed! He was one of the pioneers. Whitehill called me into his office one day. He'd just been to Washington and somewhere down South, and he said, "I sat on the plane beside a gentleman that works for the Virginia State Library. His job is similar to yours. He seems to have some pretty good ideas. Why don't you go down and get acquainted with him?"

Dorothy and I telephoned Barrow. "Come on down," he said, "I'd like to show you what I'm doing."

Bill, more than anyone else, showed the way in the great problem of acid hydrolysis. He worked for the Virginia State Library, but as a side venture he ran the Barrow Research Library. It was funded by the Council on Library Resources. Now, Bill was a remarkable person in that he was one of the most intelligent, knowledgeable men I've ever met in my life, but his formal education stopped in high school. He just had no interest in college. But in the Barrow Research Laboratory, which he ran as a moonlighting venture, he had chemists and physicists and a whole staff of people with advanced degrees who revered him. He's the first person who forcefully addressed the fact that acid is the archenemy of librarians.

The interest in acid hydrolysis was begun by a gentleman named Sudemeister, a chemist at the S. D. Warren Paper Company up in Maine. Back in 1910, this was and still is one of the biggest paper manufacturers in the United States. They had accumulated mountains of calcium, a filthy, slimy muck—"lime mud" was the term they used for it. It was a residue from paper



making. It resulted from the cooking process when they separated the cellulose fibers from the wood and turned them into fibers that were suitable for making paper.

But, even back then, in 1910, communities were concerned about dumping these chemicals in the rivers and disposing of them in lakes and ponds and swamps. Sudemeister was a recent graduate, with a degree in chemistry, when he went to work for the S. D. Warren Company. The first job they gave him was to find something to do with this lime mud. He determined that it was a chemical called calcium carbonate. He developed a means for putting the calcium carbonate back into the paper during manufacturing. The calcium carbonate was used as a filler. Nobody thought much about it until years later, when Sudemeister was still working for the company. He began to realize that some of the papers they had made thirty or forty years before were in pristine condition, and others were in deplorable condition. As a chemist, he determined that the papers that were standing up were those filled with calcium carbonate. Then he published a couple of papers on the subject.

Bill Barrow picked up on Sudemeister's work. He contacted him and asked, "Why can't we take papers that are not made with calcium carbonate and add the chemical to them to preserve them and stop them from deteriorating?" Sudemeister thought it was a great idea and encouraged him.

MRS. ELLENBERG: How did Barrow go about it?

MR. CUNHA: Well, Barrow is regarded by others as the father of deacidification, but he always gave the credit to Sudemeister.

Barrow pioneered the methods of aqueous deacidification, working mainly with calcium carbonates. Dr. Richard Smith, a chemist working at the National Archives, realized that what Barrow was doing was important. Smith, by the way, was also a librarian, although he had been an industrial chemist for twenty-five years. He had done his thesis at the University of Chicago School of Library Science on the deacidification of paper. He acknowledged Barrow's work, but he recognized its main shortcoming—an aqueous process was strictly limited to one sheet of paper at a time, whereas by his he could do an entire book.

MRS. ELLENBERG: Let's talk about handmade paper. Do you know anyone working in that area?

MR. CUNHA: Oh, yes. There are quite a few people in this country interested in making paper by hand. Right up here in



Indiana, the Clarks, they do superb paper.

MRS. ELLENBERG: That's at the Twin Rocker Mill?

MR. CUNHA: The Twin Rocker people are an interesting group. They were in rather conventional professions, and they got into making paper as a hobby. They realized that this was important—it had a lot of potential for development as a fine art. They pooled their resources and became very skillful, making paper essentially the way it was first made 2,000 years ago when the Chinese developed papermaking to get a better substance on which to record government matters. Before that it had been used as a building material for interior walls and screens; even in Chinese and Japanese homes today, there are interior paper walls and sliding paper screens. But the paper that comes out of today's vats and screens—it varies in size—it's superb paper! And, being a hand process, it's expensive to make, and you can't use it for most books, because the costs would be prohibitive. Today, with the new alkaline papermaking processes that have been developed by the paper industry, they're turning out a product that is just as acid-free and durable as the finest handmade paper ever created—strips a hundred feet wide and miles long.

MRS. ELLENBERG: Have you watched the hand craftsmen?

MR. CUNHA: I've seen paper mills in Spain and Italy and France. And I experimented with it at one time. It takes a lot of skill to turn out sheets of paper that are of consistently uniform thickness and weight and opacity, but it can be done.

Everywhere Dorothy and I went, we were interested in papermaking. And, in those days, there were still several hand paper mills in England, including the Hayle Mill of Barcham Green. They were making paper the way it had been made, by the same family, so to speak, for a couple of hundred years. And using wooden forms with a screen in the bottom and a vat of slurry in which they dipped the form and produced a sheet of paper, say, eighteen by thirty inches. Maybe they'd turn out a few hundred sheets in a day. There isn't a single hand papermaking facility in England today, unfortunately. The Hayle Mill closed because it was impossible for it to continue to provide employment, make a profit, and still continue to exist according to traditional methods. But there are still several mills on the continent, so the tradition is still there.

MRS. ELLENBERG: What about marbled papers for bookbinding?

MR. CUNHA: Marbled paper interested me. Quite some time ago



Dorothy and I were in Europe, and we'd learned about a fellow in Turkey who was making marbled paper the way it had been done for centuries. So we went over to Istanbul and registered in a hotel. I went down to the concierge and said, "I've heard that somewhere in Istanbul is a man who makes marbled paper." He said, "Tell, me—what is marbled paper?" Well, I had a little booklet with me, a professional journal, that described this person and his work. The concierge said, "I've never heard of him, but I'll see what I can do."

Several days later he came to me. "I think I've found the man that makes it, but he doesn't live in Istanbul, he lives on the Asian side of the Bosphorus."

So we got a taxi and went according to his instructions. We couldn't get the taxi up the narrow little street! But we found the shop. This fellow was a spice merchant, and he did marbling as a hobby. The shop was loaded with little drawers of spices. We talked and got acquainted; he didn't speak English, and I didn't speak Turkish, so the cab driver interpreted for us.

Finally, he realized that I was seriously interested in his hobby. He locked the door and pulled down the shade and closed his shop. He said, "Come into my house." The house was behind the spice shop. We went in and then down into the basement. I'm not a tall person, but I had to bend to get underneath the ceiling. There were the marbling vats. He marbled strictly as a hobby, and he was turning out this magnificent paper!

I said, "How did you learn this wonderful craft?" He said, "Well, I studied from a man who was the 'cloud paper' maker for the last sultan of Egypt in about 1920." Egypt became a republic in 1923, I think it was. "This man is still alive if you want to meet him." Then he told the taxi driver how to find the cloud paper maker.

But, while we were in the spice merchant's shop, there was a stack six inches deep of his beautiful paper. Immediately, I said I'd like to be his agent and introduce this paper into the United States. He smiled and said, "That offer's been made to me many times, but this is something I do because it's a work of art, and I don't want to commercialize it."

"Well," I said, "let me buy this paper from you, just to take back."

"I can't," was his reply. "Every sheet of paper I make is something I love."



I was obviously disappointed. But we started walking up the street with the cab driver, and then there was a shout, and we turned around. Here was this cloud paper maker coming up the street with the stack of paper rolled up—"for my American friend."

MRS. ELLENBERG: How nice!

MR. CUNHA: I treasure that paper. I've given some sheets to the National Archives and the Library of Congress. But getting back to the cloud paper maker—we went in the cab to another part of the city that the driver found easily. It was in an apartment block and quite comfortable. We went up and rang the doorbell on the second floor of this huge building. A woman came to the door, and the taxi driver spoke to her in Turkish and explained what we wanted. "Oh, come in," she said.

And we went in and found this gentleman. He must have been ninety-five if he was a day! As a boy, he'd been apprenticed to the papermaking facilities in the sultan's palace in Topkapi Palace. He was going to spend the rest of his life making marbled paper for the sultan. In that part of the world, marbled paper is used as much for decoration as it is for book making. This gentleman had some cloud forms framed and hanging on the wall. They were regarded as works of art. He was a fascinating man. He told me of all the dirty jobs he had to do at the palace when he was just a boy. He said it was years before he was even allowed to go into the paper shop! He was an errand boy at first, and he did all of these things before he was eligible to be taught the rudiments of the craft.

MRS. ELLENBERG: It sounds rather restrictive, doesn't it?

MR. CUNHA: Just this past week I read in one of my professional publications that the spice merchant that I'd located died in November of 1990. I think I've been extremely fortunate in my lifetime in that I've had some opportunities to get around and see this world in which we live and meet so many interesting people.